



## Puritanism and Its Impact upon American Values

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### Abstract

American Puritanism originated from a movement for reform in the Church of England, which had a profound influence on social, political, ethical, and theological ideas of the Americans. Focusing on its impact upon American values, the present paper first discusses the origin and the tenets of Puritanism. The forming of American individualism and democratic thoughts were, obviously, influenced by Puritanism in New England. It also shaped American people's national character of being hard-working and thrifty, and made them bear a strong sense of mission. Moreover, Puritanism rendered Americans devoted to popular education.

**Keywords:** Puritanism, Puritans, New England, American values

### 1. The Origin of American Puritanism and Its development in America

Originally, Puritanism refers to a movement that arose within the Church of England in the latter part of the 16th century. It sought to purify, or reform the Church and establish a middle course between Roman Catholicism and the ideas of the Protestant reformers. Those who advocated Puritanism were called Puritans. In England of the 16th century, the Puritans were the more extreme Protestants within the Church. They thought that the religious reformation in England had not gone far enough in reforming the doctrines and structure of the church. They wanted to purify their national church by eliminating every shred of Catholic influence.

After James I became king of England in 1603, English Puritan leaders asked him to grant more reforms, including abolition of bishops. However, he rejected most of their proposals. Moreover, the English government and the church hierarchy became increasingly repressive. Many Puritans were persecuted and had to emigrate to Europe and the New World.

Early in the 17th century Puritanism reached North America with English Puritans who were usually referred to as the English Pilgrims. In 1620 they founded Plymouth Colony. Afterwards more Puritans emigrated and they built more colonies, including Massachusetts (1628), New Hampshire (1629), Connecticut (1633), Maine (1635), Rhode Island (1636), and New Haven (1638). The Puritans brought strong religious beliefs to bear in all colonies north of Virginia. New England became their stronghold, where they sought to found a holy Commonwealth. Puritanism remained the dominant religious force in that area throughout the 17th and 18th centuries. During the whole colonial period Puritanism had direct impact on both religious thought and cultural patterns in America.

By 1640 some 35 churches had been established in New England. The Puritans there maintained the Calvinist distinction between the elect and the damned in their theory of the church, in which membership consisted only of the regenerate minority who publicly confessed their experience of conversion. Ministers had great political influence, and civil authorities exercised a large measure of control over church affairs.

In 1662 it was made easier for the unregenerate majority to become church members in Massachusetts by the adoption of the Half-Way Covenant. Clerical power was lessened by the expansion of New England and the opening of frontier settlements filled with colonists who were resourceful, secular, and engaged in a struggle to adapt to a difficult environment. In 1692 in Massachusetts a new charter expressed the change from a theocratic to a political, secular state; suffrage was stripped of religious qualifications.

After the 17th century the Puritans as a political entity largely disappeared, but Puritan attitudes and ethics continued to exert an influence on American society. They made a virtue of qualities that made for economic success—self-reliance, frugality, industry, and energy—and through them influenced modern social and economic life. (The Columbia Encyclopedia, Sixth Edition, 2007: 39583) Their concern for education was important in the development of the United

States, and the idea of congregational democratic church government was carried into the political life of the state as a source of modern democracy.

## 2. The Tenets of American Puritanism

Generally speaking, key puritan beliefs and values include:

- A. Godly people were sober, hardworking, and responsible. English society had been corrupted by foreign influences and by disorder and needed to be purified.
- B. Catholicism had undermined the relationship between God and the individual
- C. Election & predestination – God chooses who is saved and who is damned. No one can earn salvation through works. Yet the saints are responsible for their actions.
- D. The congregation of saints chooses its members, hires and fires its ministers, and recognizes no other religious authority.
- E. Worship should be plain, lack mystery, and be focused on God, No stained glass, instrumental music, or art.
- F. Much value of education
- G. Intolerance – error must be opposed and driven out

(Feldmeth, Greg D. “American Puritanism,” U.S. History Resources. <<http://gfeldmeth/USHistory.html/lec.pur.html>> Revised 21 June 2004)

The central tenet of Puritanism was God’s supreme authority over human affairs in the church, as expressed in the Bible. So they tried hard to seek both individual and corporate conformance to the teaching of the Bible, and pursue both moral purity and ecclesiastical purity. The belief in predestination differentiated Puritans from other Christians. To Puritans, belief in Jesus and participation in the sacraments could not alone fulfill one’s salvation; one cannot choose salvation, because that is the privilege of God alone. All features of salvation are determined by God’s sovereignty, including choosing those who will be saved and those who will receive God’s irresistible grace.

To the Puritans, a person by nature was inherently sinful and corrupt, and only by severe and unremitting discipline could they achieve good. Each person should be constantly reformed by the grace of God to combat the “indwelling sin” and do the right before God. Thus, they considered hard work a religious duty and laid emphasis on constant self-examination and self-discipline. They believed that man was duty-bound to do God’s will, so he could understand best by studying the Bible and the universe which God had created and which he controlled.

Puritans advocated a humble and obedient life. They also emphasized private study of the Bible. They believed everyone is the priest for themselves. Alexis de Tocqueville (1998) suggested in *Democracy in America* that the English Pilgrims were hard-working, egalitarian, and studious, and they provided a firm foundation for American democracy.

Besides, Puritan theology and social relationships are filled with the concept of a covenant or contract between God and his elect. There are several types of covenants which are central to Puritan thought: the Covenant of Works, Covenant of Grace, and Covenant of Redemption.

## 3. The Impact upon American Values

Puritanism is not only a religious belief, but a philosophy, a combination of life styles with living values. It has exerted great influence on American culture, and shaped the national characters of American people. Many of the mainstream values in the U.S. such as individualism, egalitarianism, optimism, can find their origin in Puritanism of colonial periods.

### 3.1 Puritanism lays foundation for American Individualism

As is known, individualism is the core of American values. It is rooted deeply in early American Puritanism. Nowadays, the value of individualism has permeated every corner of American society. It places great value on self-reliance, on privacy, and on mutual respect. Puritanism, being a product of the religious reform, keeps the anti-authority tradition and develops a strong self-awareness.

Firstly, Puritans’ “justification-by-faith” concept led to the denial of Pope’s authority, and bridged the gap between God and man. That is, every Christian can communicate directly with God through his faith to Him, and every one can be his own priest. So, the minds of Christians were emancipated from rigid Roman Catholicism. In this sense, personal values were stressed, and one’s soul became more free and independent.

Secondly, following Martin Luther’s tenets, Puritans formed their own church, chose their own priest, and eliminated the hierarchical system in church. As a result, Christians were freed from severe Roman Catholic rules; church became a free organization of Christians, and salvation was a personal spiritual pursuit.

Moreover, “predestination” in Puritanism strengthened Puritans’ self-awareness to perfect oneself. Puritans believes that

their religious purity and salvation could be achieved through self-discipline, self-improvement and their hard work. German religious sociologist Max Weber affirmed and acclaimed these qualities in his book *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.

Obviously Puritans' anti-authority and their strong self-awareness paved the way for the development of individualism in colonial America, and later becoming one of the most important values of American people.

### *3.2 Puritanism lays foundation for American democracy*

American democracy has always been regarded as the example of western democracies. The Declaration of Independence (1776) illustrates the ideas that "all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." After the War of Independence, the United States began to carry on its constitutional democracy. The government was divided into three branches: executive, legislative, and judicial. The early Puritanism played a key role in the establishment of American democratic regime.

In fact, Mayflower Compact of 1620 led to the birth of early American democracy. The compact was signed on 11 November 1620 on board the Mayflower. It attempted to establish a temporary government until a more official one could be drawn up in England that would give them the right to self-govern themselves in New England. Afterwards the "popular sovereignty" concept began spreading among other colonies.

The Puritan belief that communities were formed by covenants produced America's first democratic institution, the town meeting. At the town meeting every church member had the right to speak, and decisions were made by majority rule. ("Puritanism" Microsoft® Encarta® Online Encyclopedia 2008: [http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia\\_761565242/puritanism.html](http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761565242/puritanism.html))

Furthermore, the autonomic principle that the puritan churches followed contributed a lot to the establishment of American democracy. As we mentioned above, American Puritans could form churches with their own will, in which they chose priest by themselves and they managed by themselves. There was no rigid hierarchy in church. Such church pattern helped form later American democracy.

### *3.3 Puritanism shaped the Americans' national character – acquiring wealth through hard work and thrift*

American Puritans linked material wealth with God's favor. They believed that hard work was the way to please God. Created more wealth through one's work and thrift could guarantee the God's elect. The doctrine of predestination kept all Puritans constantly working to do good in this life in order to be chosen for the next eternal life. God had already chosen who would be in heaven or hell, but Christians had no way of knowing which group they were in. Those who were wealthy would obviously be blessed by God and in good standing with Him. The work ethic of Puritans was the belief that hard work was an honor to God which would lead to a prosperous reward. Any deviations from the normal way of Puritan life would be strictly denied and disapproved.

Besides the Christians in America colonies who lectured on these morals, some social activists such as Benjamin Franklin vigorously promoted the values of being diligent and thrifty. In particular the works by Benjamin Franklin made those values implanted in American people's minds. The pursuit of wealth encouraged them to conquer the nature and develop more frontiers. Therefore every puritan tried to work hard to do his own job better. They developed their characters of taking risks and pursuing without ending.

Many Americans, relying on themselves, have been out of poverty and become rich and won respect from the whole society. By the eve of the Civil War, the value of acquiring wealth through hard work and thrift had stimulated fast development of American capitalism. This value also played a key role during the Reconstruction after the war and the period of Western Expansion. Now it is part of American national character. To most Americans, material achievements are the mark of one's success, the manifestation of their personal values, and the symbol of one's independence.

### *3.4 Puritanism contributed to American people's strong sense of mission*

Since the founding of the United States, Americans have believed that it is their mission to spread social justice and liberty across the world, and to lead human beings to the New Jerusalem. This sense of mission was deeply rooted in American culture, and exerted a huge influence on the values and attitudes of American people.

The sense of mission could be traced back to Puritans' predestination. To the emigrated Puritans, they were the God's chosen people who, with God's direction, came to North America – the New World to escape religious persecution. The New World was "land of hope" where they constructed a New Jerusalem, and pursued their religious ideals. They believed they bore the mission to spread Christian spirits and save the sinful people of the world.

The strong sense of mission became a spiritual stimulus for early Puritans in the course of developing the New World. With the increasing of their ethnic identity, Americans integrated the mission-sense into their nationality. Moreover, the mission-sense has been clearly manifested in the country's foreign policy. Most Americans have always believed that

the United States is a beacon to the world. It is their mission to spread, acting on God's will, their democracy and liberty to all peoples of the world, and send light to every corner of the earth. Thus with their national power strengthening, the United States began to output their culture and values to many other countries by way of political interference, economic bailouts or military pressure. As a result, the other cultures in the world, more or less have been affected by American culture. In a sense, it is due to the strong sense of mission inherent in their culture that the United States is promoting their values and patterns of democracy. Of course, in reality, Americans are confronted with many challenges when they try every means to implement their mission. It is nearly impossible for them to reshape the world with their values.

### 3.5 Puritanism contributed Americans' devotion to popular education

The Puritans had a zeal for education, and such zeal finds its origin in the doctrine of "Covenant". According to covenant theology, since man landed themselves into Adam's sin, schools would be needed to instruct man out of their sinful nature, and thus to save them. In the view of the Puritans, the Bible was central to Christian education. They desired education and enlightenment for everyone, especially the common people. They wanted people to be able to read and understand the Bible for themselves. Reading of the Bible was necessary to living a pious life. The education of the next generation was important to further "purify" the church and perfect social living. This view goes back to Martin Luther's ideas, who stated, "Above all, the foremost reading for everybody, both in the universities and in the schools, should be Holy Scripture... I would advise no one to send his child where the Holy Scriptures are not supreme."

Upon reaching the New World, the emigrated Puritans put a priority on establishing colleges, and they quickly opened public schools as well. For the Puritans, the primary goal of education was "Christian nurture and growth." So, for the first time in American history, free schooling was offered for all children. Puritans formed the first formal school in 1635, which was called the Roxbury Latin School. Four years later, in 1639, the first American College –Harvard College was established. By 1647 a Massachusetts law mandated that every town of 50 families or more support an elementary school and every town of 100 or more families support a grammar school where boys could learn Latin in preparation for college. Due to their high respect for education, there was a lower level of illiteracy in New England than anywhere else in America.

The Puritans were also proponents of a liberal arts education, so that they might be "fit for everything." They did not restrict education to religious subjects only. Indeed, they believed that all truth is God's truth, and they looked for truth wherever it might be found.

## 4. Conclusion

The dominance of Puritanism in New England has already disappeared, but its influence is far reaching on modern Americans' life, especially on American values. Henry Steele Commager (1977) approved the significance of Puritanism in his book *American Mind*. According to him, although its theological effect has faded away as time passes by, Puritanism continues to exert its influence on ethical and political thoughts in American. We cannot deny that American people's values have changed, and their lifestyles are quite different from what Puritans in New England advocated. However, the basics of American values conform to the essence of Puritanism. So, to Americans, Puritanism is not only a religious conviction, but an element of American culture, which shaped the values of American people as well as their national characters.

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